How to help a victim of domestic violence

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Introduction

Domestic violence is defined as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2011). Domestic Violence (DV) is directed at both men and women, with similar detrimental effects. For victims, admitting to friends and family that they are suffering abuse is extremely difficult. Not only are victims afraid of their abusers, but they are often fearful of the response they will receive from others when they learn of the abuse (Zosky, 2011). To support the victim and to help assure them that the abuse they are suffering is undeserved, it is important that family, friends and community members understand what they can do to help victims of domestic violence. The purpose of this publication is to provide an overview of the difficulties victims face when leaving an abusive situation, and what we can do to help them be successful in leaving.

Why don’t victims just leave?

Leaving an abusive situation is difficult, especially when the victim has been subjected to prolonged periods of denigration by their abuser. Victims are conditioned to believe that the abuse is a result of their personal behavior. They are also often told by the abuser that they are incapable of caring for themselves or their children and that their lives will get worse for them if they attempt to leave. The belief that victims can simply walk away is a common misconception, and fails to take into consideration the control the abuser exerts to eliminate victim choice and self-confidence (Anderson, Gillig, Sitaker, McCloskey, Malloy and Grisby, 2003). To understand why victims stay, it is important to understand the methods abusers use to exert control.

Abusive behavior is normally characterized within five main categories: physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological (USDOJ, 2011). While different agencies vary in how they categorize the abuse, they overwhelmingly agree that most victims experience multiple types of abuse.

1. Physical: As signs of physical abuse can be most obvious (bruises, cuts, broken bones, swelling), it is commonly believed that all intimate partner violence (IPV) is manifested through a victim being beaten. While horrific acts of physical violence can occur, it is a misconception that all victims are beaten. Reports of non-homicide physical abuse may include biting, slapping, restraining, shoving, hitting (with or without the use of a weapon), and/or the threat of physical violence. Some victims may not be physically touched, yet the threat of physical assault is so pervasive, that victims fear they will be. Often the threat is directed at individuals other than the victim, such as children or other family members, using the threat of another’s harm as leverage for the offender to maintain control. Offenders also use threats against pets to control victim behavior.

2. Sexual: Sexual abuse is used by offenders to demean and control a victim. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV, 2007) reports that sexual assault or forced sex occurs in approximately 40 to 45 percent of battering relationships. In a June 2009 USDOJ report, it further states that studies indicate that if there is physical abuse in domestic violence, there is probably sexual abuse as well. Forms
of sexual abuse include rape (including marital rape), attempted rape, attacks on sexual body parts, requiring the performance of sexual acts, and threats of sexual assault. One in six women and one in 33 men have experienced an attempted or completed rape (NCADV, 2011). Many factors contribute to under-reporting including shame and embarrassment, self-blame, fear of media exposure, fear of further injury or retaliation, and fear of a legal system that often puts the victim's behavior and history on trial (The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2008).

3. **Emotional**: An underlying theme within IPV is the intentional destruction of a victim's self-esteem. Offenders who manipulate a victim’s self-worth are more likely to be able to control a victim. Constant criticism, name-calling, and minimizing a victim’s abilities, are all methods for emotionally controlling a victim. When a victim feels worthless, they are less likely to believe that they deserve better treatment and, therefore, are more apt to remain in an abusive relationship. According to the USDOJ (2007), in most cases, emotional violence has been preceded by acts or threats of physical or sexual violence. When children are present in the home, the offender may manipulate youth in the demeaning behavior, alienating the victim from his or her own children.

4. **Economic**: The objective of financial abuse is to keep the victim dependent upon the offender. Victims may be prohibited from having access to household money or from obtaining employment. Oppressive accountability may be demanded of victims who are given access to funds for purchasing basic necessities; many victims have necessities withheld. Victims are often prevented from opening bank accounts or obtaining credit. Offenders may attempt to cause an employed victim to lose his or her job through harassing behavior at the victim’s place of work. According to the NCADV between 35 and 56 percent of victims of IPV are harassed at work by their abuser. Between a quarter and a half of the victims report they have lost a job due to domestic violence.

5. **Psychological**: Offenders traumatize victims through intimidation and threats. While offenders threaten and perform physical, financial, sexual and emotional harm to the victim, often the threats are aimed at family members, children, co-workers, friends and pets. The offender isolates the victim from family and friends, so that all basic support must come from the offender, causing the victim to feel incapable of escape. Victims, therefore, yield to offender requirements. According to Mental Health America (2011), survivors of violence acts, including domestic violence, can suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can occur after an individual has been through a traumatic event. A traumatic event is something horrible and scary that one sees or experiences. During this type of event, one may think that his or her life or others’ lives are in danger. A person may feel afraid or feel that he or she has no control over what is happening (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD, 2011).

While victims suffer multiple types of abuse with varying levels of severity, the overwhelming constant is that abusers will use whatever means available to control a victim’s independence. By keeping the victim in a state of entrenched and reinforced powerlessness, the abuser is able to manipulate the victim into remaining compliant. For those who question why victims stay in abusive situations, it is important to understand that victims often feel as if they have no choice. We have all heard comments such as "if my boy/girlfriend or husband/wife ever treated me like that, I’d be gone." Yet, this statement assumes that the violent behavior is a one time event, following which the victim immediately leaves. However, most victims emphasize that the current abuse they suffer is the result of a gradual process of domination that is interspersed with good times and fearful events (LaViolette and Barnett, 2000). This cycle keeps the victim hoping that things will change, yet fearful of the consequences of a decision to leave.

In 1979, the Walker Cycle Theory of Violence stated that there were three distinct phases associated with the battering cycle (Walker, 2000). The first phase is one characterized by a building tension in which the abuser starts to get angry. The victim, feeling as if they are walking on egg shells, does whatever possible to keep the abuser calm (Domestic Violence.org). Because the victim is feeling more afraid, s/he often withdraws from the abuser, waiting for the inevitable explosion.
Other times, the victim will do something to initiate the explosion in the hopes that the explosion will occur in a way that s/he can control the damage. Often this is to minimize the injury and pain, or to direct the explosion away from children or others for whom the victim feels responsible (Walker, 2000). While those not educated about the dynamics of domestic violence often blame the victim for antagonizing the explosive event, the reality is that the event is inevitable; the victim is trying to minimize the fall-out.

The second phase is characterized by the explosive event in the form of verbal and/or physical aggression. Victims will resort to basic survival instincts, deflecting as much of the violence as possible. Normally this explosive event is what most people recognize as domestic violence. While clearly the most dangerous, this stage is merely a part of the cycle of domestic violence that occurs. “Violence often succeeds because it works” (Walker, 2000).

The third phase is described as the “making-up” phase. The abuser in this phase tries to make amends, begging for forgiveness, promising they will never act violently again. This is also a phase in which the behavior that initially made the victim care for the abuser is once again shown. During this phase, the abuser may also minimize the abuse, eventually acting as if it never happened (Domestic Violence.org). While the violence may have ceased during this phase, the apprehension of violence never leaves the victim. This absence of violence still controls the victim as s/he never fully relaxes as the next explosion may occur at any time (Walker, 2000).

Unfortunately, this cycle can happen numerous times within a relationship, with varying levels of degree and length of event. What seems to be evident, however, is even though the “making-up” phase may decline, the victim is still conditioned to stay with the abuser, apprehensive of the eventual explosive event.

What to do help a victim

While domestic violence is recognized as one intimate partner exerting control over another, each DV relationship is different. Keeping the victim safe is the top priority. In less explosive situations, being a friend means understanding that the victim is not at fault, and reinforcing that they do not deserve the abuse. First and foremost, if a violent act is imminent, call 911 to get immediate help. Non-judgmental comments and listening to the victim goes a long way to let the victim know s/he is not alone and that you care. Remind the victim that they do not deserve this and that they have done nothing wrong to provoke it. If the victim needs to leave, discuss a safe place and assist the victim in relocating. While abusers often tell the victims what to do, refrain from making statements that tell the victim what to do. Instead, help guide the victim to make safe choices and give them contact information for trained victim advocates. The hardest step for victims is often the first. It is reported that a victim makes seven to 12 attempts to leave before being successful, and leaving a violent situation is the most dangerous time for a victim. Therefore, helping

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<th>How to help a victim of DV</th>
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<td>• Call 911 if victim is in danger</td>
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<td>• Listen to the victim</td>
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<td>• Do not be judgmental</td>
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<td>• Learn about the dynamics of DV from reputable DV intervention or prevention programs</td>
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<td>• Offer to help victim contact DV advocate to obtain information</td>
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<td>• Help victim develop a safety plan</td>
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<td>• Help find supportive community resources</td>
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<td>• Accompany victim to court to obtain a protective order</td>
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<td>• Remember that leaving an abuser is a frightening experience.</td>
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<td>• Be patient with the victim as they make plans to leave, if they do.</td>
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<td>• Help build community awareness of domestic violence</td>
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<td>• Remember that your role is to support the victim and not to make the decision for the victim</td>
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<td>• Remind the victim that s/he does not deserve the abuse</td>
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<td>• If you observe abusive behavior, report it immediately</td>
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the victim develop a safety plan is critical. As a friend or family member, you can help by finding local resources to support the victim. Most importantly, do not be discouraged if the victim stays in the abusive situation. This is a very difficult and frightening decision for the victim. If you are not supportive and understanding, the victim feels even more frightened and alone.

Conclusion

Focusing on victim behavior and why they stay perpetuates the belief that victims are responsible for the abuse. While it is important to understand the abuse that victims suffer in order to understand the fear, shame and guilt they feel, the impetus for change should be placed on the abuser. After all, it is the abuser who is inflicting the suffering on the victim, and it should be the abuser on whom the responsibility is placed. For friends, family and the community, efforts should be made to create community awareness and support for the victim and family. Developing a supportive environment helps ensure that the victim does not feel alone, and that there are other alternatives than to remain in an abusive situation.

For more information on ways to help victims in Nevada, please contact the Nevada Network Against Domestic Violence at 1-800-230-1955 or visit their website www.nnadv.org for additional resources.

References and Additional Resources


